

Are we not all micro-historians? Part I. The question of size

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2019

‘Historicism [...] denies the possibility of repeating large-scale social experiments...’

(Karl Popper: *The Poverty of Historicism*, p.8)

Abstract

Micro-history plays an important role in the history industry. That it is under-valued (and -funded) is borne out by views that want to deprive it certain status and ‘scientific privileges’. The rapid rise of new disciplines in its close proximity, and the necessity of opening up, apart from traditional culture-focused analysis, new fields of study, are burdens it need to leave behind. Size should no longer be a limiting factor – the debate has moved on. The outstanding theoretical, methodological and philosophical ‘issues’ in micro-historical *praxis*, are not necessary conditions for despair or even unnatural. The challenge for microhistory to tackle environmental concerns in the era of the Capitalocene, is a minimum condition to make lasting contributions to the dire situation of all ecologies – simply because they are all *critical* ecologies. Micro-historians do not confine their efforts only to small matters.

Key words: environment, Environmental Micro-history, Environmental Humanities, size, rainfall history.

Introduction

Are humans not all also micro-historians? ‘No’, but we could be, depending on *how* we investigate or tell our story and *not what* is being investigated or told (Gregory 1999: 100), taking at least fact (Engelbrecht 2013: 1–12; Kuhn 1970), theory (Engelbrecht 2012: 1–12) and relevant sources into consideration.

With the current revelations of institutionalized post-apartheid ANC-corruption (Engelbrecht 2016; 2018a; 2018b; 2018c) in South Africa, micro-historians specializing in the history of fraud and corruption can be assured of jobs for the next few centuries. One South African example in this regard will suffice. The current testimonies by different witnesses at the Zondo commission of inquiry into state capture provides, amongst many things, at least two opportunities that are of importance to microhistory: firstly, the testimony of any one witness is fertile ground for micro-historical investigation, and secondly, it highlights the problems surrounding the popular concept of ‘shifting scales’ of analysis in micro-history – a concept still shrouded in uncertainty (Berg and Ghobrial 2016: 1).

To give the reader an early sense of how differently ‘size’ or scale is viewed, I draw on one point that Berg and Ghobrial 2016: 2) reported on after a workshop (held in Venice at the end of February 2016), as follows:

‘one major point of discussion concerned the way in which scholarship has tended to map terms like “micro” and “macro” on to the categories of “local” and “global”. Some participants were especially keen to disentangle “micro” from “macro” and “macro” from “global”; others made persuasive cases for ways in which scholars could define the “local” according to the language, terms, and experiences of the actual people they studied. This was especially salient, for example, in discussion of urban history, the mapping of space, and aide about the construction of “lived environment”.

The purpose of this article is to make as few tentative comments about the practice of micro-history – something that humans seemingly do naturally or instinctively in one form or another in our everyday lives. For instance, through Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube (and many more) we tell our neighbor/s all the stories our family told us during the last annual visit in a far-off country, or about the bad shopping experience yesterday at the local shopping mall, or the pleasant nature photography outing recently at a favorite location. Naturally, some stories are ‘bigger’ than others and some relate to a place (or places) ‘larger’ or ‘smaller’ than others.

Everything in life has relative size (Salmon *et al.* 1999), occupies relative space (Lefebvre 2012) and are produced in different ways (Goodman 1975) – micro-history is no different. Whether we

study political, economic, religious, cultural, aviation, maritime, environmental, retail, gender, or rainfall history, size matters. Similarly, any of these can be studied on micro, local, regional, continental or global scale – depending on how the research project has been formulated. But the ‘idea that [as micro-historians claim] intense reflection on a single event, place or life, might yield unique insights across scales of space and time is hardly new’ (Walton *et al.* 2019: 3). None of this minimize ethical commitments to historical professionalism, and science-specific requirements. These topics (and many more) can cut across conventional disciplinary boundaries for micro-historical investigation. In all of them, local museums and historical societies can play an invaluable role in promoting micro-historical writing. And not surprising, because museums and societies always deal with time and space in one form or another.

But complacency about the ‘apparent’ (e.g. size) and the ‘obvious’ (e.g. that one instinctively knows something when you see/experience it) is dangerous. Practicing (or ‘doing’) micro-history is not ‘easier’ than any other form of historical investigation, neither is the process of writing up of the research results ‘less complicated’ just because it is of micro and not grand or macro scale. In addition, micro-history is not less ‘glamorous’ than e.g. global history, world-history or global micro-history – the latter is certainly not of any ‘higher’ order than micro-history. Naturally, micro-history is not as ‘big’ as political history, for instance, but does size really matter here? Instead, they are all a *specific kind* with *specific objectives* and *specific methodologies* and *characteristics*. Some students of micro-history would argue that it is the research *outcomes* and *not* the theory, method and/or philosophy that ultimately matters in order to achieve research goals. But, Zoltán B Simone (2009: 3), for instance, made this point as follows: ‘Today, as I see it, we waste too much energy to picture those past practices as if they were applicable methods to us, and we don’t invest enough in experimental work.’ This is untenable since theory, method and philosophy are not mutually exclusive to research outcomes. In this light Waddell (2012) cautions because etymology can be deceiving. For him ‘microhistories’ seem to be more – or maybe less – than simply ‘small histories’. This is because he (and many other micro-historians) views micro-history as ‘a particular methodological approach to the study and writing of history.’ The mere use of the word ‘approach’ has taken up much conference or workshop time.

After a conference (in late June 2016 in Reykjavík) about the development of a curriculum for a joint MA-program for Microhistory, professor Gábor Vaderna (2016) summarized the presentations of the workshop in a short report. To introduce the readers (of this article) to the main issues, extracts from Vaderna’s summary are listed as follows:

- How scholars ‘could teach and transfer different historical methods in their own practice’
- That their ‘subjective viewpoints, which are not strange in different microhistories, revealed several key questions’

- How historians deal with ‘intimacy’, yet how difficult it is ‘to dissociate ordinary and extraordinary matters, events, acts, and agents of history’
- That there are different ‘ways microhistory could use individual life stories or biographies’
- How ‘the “thick description” of everyday life, especially women’s everyday life’ brings into question micro-historical method
- That the problems of ‘various narratological practices’ need be considered
- That ‘story-telling and experimentation with narratives has been one of the distinctive features of many historians’
- And lastly, that ‘the mode of narrative, the different ways of story-telling, and the widely various roles of narratives were “carefully crafted analytical devices”’.

There is, however, an important warning from Gregory (1999: 100; 104):

‘When we examine something in great detail and at close range, do we understand it better? It depends on what we want to know [...] Viewing a frog’s skin cells through a microscope reveals their physiology, but suggests nothing of the frog’s place in its ecosystem. Does our understanding of the past work the same way?’

As a result, ‘neither the history of everyday life nor microhistory aspire to be simply ordinary history writ small—not every case study or local study is *ipso facto* a microhistory’.

Instead, microhistory has its ‘own ways’ of arriving at generalities, and with its ‘particular’ functions, it therefore cannot be a ‘straight transfer of a set of easily identifiable methodological principles [with] practically everything that has the potential to make it look attractive to fellow historians’ (Simon 2015:1; 3; 4; 6.), onto another.

General observations about micro-history’s history

It appears that the word micro-history was first used in 1959 by GR Stewart in the title of his book *Pickett’s Charge. A Micro-history of the Final Attack at Gettysburg, July 3, 1863*. This book of some 350 pages is practically a minute-by-minute account of a military conflict at Gettysburg (Pennsylvania) on 3 July 1863 during the American Civil War between Confederates and the Union that lasted about 15 hours. This battle was regarded as a ‘central moment of our [US] history’ that ‘reversed the course of war and decisively altered history. The moment is a [...] symbolic one [...] part of world-history’, Stewart (1987: ix) wrote. Whether this military conflict was an attack, charge,

assault or advance, is another issue. It does, however, highlight one of the limitations of language. Richard Blundell (2015) is of the view that *Pickett's Charge* was 'written in *obsessive microscopic detail*' (Emphasis added). Ginzburg (1993: 12) made the same point when he wrote that Stewart's 'analyzes [reflects] almost *obsessive detail* [in] what he defines as "the climax of the climax"'.

The start of academic micro-history was in the 1970s in Italy with the discovery of many unknown church history documents. Micro-history's growth and popularity at the time was in reaction to top-down history rather than from a bottom-up approach. It aimed to make knowledge about society and culture known to the general public and focused on 'outsiders, outcasts and in the powerless of society' (Simon 2015: 7) the ordinary citizen, 'little' ('small') people as opposed to 'big' or important people – kings, queens, world leaders or prominent elite of *haute* society. They are 'those who led their lives at a remove from the power centers of society and played no direct part in the decisions that have affected its form and development' (Magnússon 2013). After all, 'previously historians had devoted only "one-millionth" of their attention to the actions of ordinary people' (Walton *et al.* 2019: 4). This is probably still true today.

By the beginning of this century, Professor Szijártó (2002: 209) could argue that:

'micro-orientated social history [...] has a clear advantage over macro-oriented traditional social history owing to its four characteristics: it is appealing to the general public, it is realistic, it conveys personal experience and whatever it has in its focus, the lines branching out from this reach very far.'

A decade later, NL Rion (2011: 1–23, 8–20) developed the following four categories for the historiography in microhistory: academic works; traditional or 'Instituto'; Macro/microhistories or *La Grande Petite Microhistoire*, and microhistory as a short story or novel.

Engelbrecht (2018a: 1) wrote that '[u]nlike the popularity of micro-historical research in Europe and the US, in South Africa it remains largely underdeveloped – professors Lizette Rabe (2010) and Johann M Wasserman (2016) correctly suggested that more research should be forthcoming.'

The circumstances during which micro-history developed, can, if Gregory (1999: 100–110) is used as a starting point, briefly be summarized as follows. During the 1970s many leftist social historians (Marxist and otherwise) were dissatisfied with the then political and epistemological practices and were instead looking for new ways to reduce historical scale in the history of both everyday life and micro-history. They have lost faith in the apparent liberation of the masses and marginalized of civil society because of the influences of what became known as neo-liberal capitalism, unabated politics, increased power of big business, technological advances, and the influences of mass media. Instead of being liberated, the masses became downtrodden.

Since 1989 the growth of ‘global, information-age capitalism’ (Gregory 1999: 101–102) made matters worse. Against this, although in a different context (but still relevant for the views herein), Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (2002: xiv) wrote in the Preface to 1944 and 1947 edition of their book *Dialectical Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*, that what they ‘had set out to do was nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism.’ Similarly, Jürgen Habermas (1974: 1) wanted to ‘develop the idea of a theory of society conceived with a practical intention’.

Although there are many prominent micro-historians today, the focus here is briefly on two who seem to be setting the contemporary micro-historical theoretical and methodological debate. Firstly, Szijártó follows a ‘fractal conception’ of micro-history. For him, although ‘there is a specific microhistorical way to gain knowledge of the past, it [...] cannot do without the general level’. Fractal means ‘the repetition of the same or almost the same pattern on all scales of the set or the system’ (Simon 2015: 7; 8). There is also a strong sense of contextualization in the work and understandings of Szijártó.

Secondly, Professor SG Magnússon (2016: 1) based his methodological approach for micro-history on the concept of ‘singularization of history’ that does not rely on ‘grand narratives’. One can best summarize the crux of Magnússon’s difference in his own words as follows: ‘Almost all Italian microhistorians, and in fact most microhistorians worldwide would uphold the importance of contextualization – placing the small unit of study in a broader context.’ He continued: ‘I refute this principle and demonstrate its inherent contradictions’. ‘The danger however, is that even if grand narratives and contextualization are dropped, all that is left is ‘just *another* context’ (Simon 2015: 10). (Emphasis added). But not all ‘singularity-ists’ agree (Snooks 2018: 1). Arguably, the most comprehensive critiques of their different contributions are those of Simon.

On the one hand Simon (2009: 2) is skeptical of ‘future success’ of micro-history arguing that it has lost its momentum of the early years regarding its ability to experiment. On the other hand, when Magnussen does employ the concept of ‘singularization of history’ and Szijártó ‘the world of fractals’ (Simon 2015: 2) it should have been done in a different way. Secondly, for Simon (2009: 1) ‘there is no such thing as the “Theory of Microhistory”’. This is a surprising view: what intellectual pursuit can there be with no such thing as a theory? Thirdly, if Simon (2009: 2) is correct that ‘microhistory has already become something what Thomas Kuhn would describe as “normal science”’, after being in existence for only some three decades with yet no real agreement on many principle issues amongst practitioners, how can that represent a state of ‘normal science’? Lastly, Simon (2009: 16; 17) is quite emphatic: ‘stop methodology-talk’ and again ‘talking about microhistory in terms of methodology is anything but not microhistorical’ he wrote. That is probably so because he ‘don’t think that methodology-talk is completely unnecessary. There’s a tiny room for it, perhaps, if someone takes microhistory as a historical formation we have already left behind’ (Simon 2009: 2). Some of Simon’s criticisms of micro-history do not give enough credit to the process of scientific development through

paradigmatic succession/s in microhistory. But Simon does not need to be overly worried, because fortunately, in this regard, Thomas Robisheaux (2017: 2) assures us in no uncertain terms that ‘[n]o one is more aware of microhistory’s pitfalls and limitations than microhistorians themselves.’

Testimony to this problem is the fact that microhistory and global history have developed into different directions to the extent that:

‘John-Paul Ghobrial’s ERC-funded research project based at Oxford [...] is trying to find a new methodology that links the study of the micro-scale level of everyday life with the macro-narratives cherished by global historians. [...] A certain type of global history, especially that written in the U.S., has, however, recently gone the way of “big data” collection, wide structures and geographies: the people and events have been lost’ (Berg 2016).

Some current debates in current micro-history

Micro-historians place *knowledge* in close relation to *dialogue* (narrative) and *personal participation* in the process of constructing the historical argument. Professor Carlo Ginzburg (1993: 1–27), one of the founding members of micro-history, wrote about reduced scale, narrow time frame, and many more concepts relating to micro-history, when he first learnt about the word micro-history in the latter part of the 1970s. Of course, techniques of persuasion and ‘interpretative construction’ with a ‘second story to follow’, are employed (amongst others) to recreate a plausible, and in as much detail possible, story of the everyday life (Simon 2009: 4). These are place, time and motive bound (Cohen 2011). For this reason, micro-historians have a ‘close look’ at their sources to unearth the ‘lived life’ of the actors (Simon 2009: 2).

Unlike ‘assorted analytical practices’ of other genres of history, microhistory is different with ‘less theory, less canon’ yet, ‘has a great deal to offer historians of all sorts’ wrote professor Cohen (2012). In an email to Szijártó, Cohen (2012) made (amongst other) the following observations: ‘we microhistorians are far more skilled than most historians at subtle reading of evidence. We squeeze our sources hard, we read for nuance, we listen carefully to language, we crawl into and even behind our sources’. Furthermore, ‘microhistorians are very keen to assemble, as far as possible, the entirety of past moments’ [...] ‘to take to heart the story-teller’s art.’ Lastly, ‘[m]icrohistory is keen to bring the past to life.’ About 15 years later Szijártó (2016b: 192) wrote that since micro-history is situated between social and cultural history, it has ‘chances better than usual to arriving at valid new historical understandings.’ How does this happen? It happens through the processes of subversion (the sudden regrouping of information in a new form), through junior partnership and cooperation with macrohistory, by cooperating with macro-history, and lastly, through combining these three (Szijártó 2016b: 191–197).

In such process care must be taken not to be unduly influenced by emotions or that ‘otherness’ or ‘sameness’ distorts historical perspective (Simon 2009: 10; 11–13). Cohen (2011) also cautions against the dangers of ‘presentism, novelistic temptations’ and ‘imperfect local knowledge’ that could detract from the quality of work. Even worse, it could compromise the research and writing outcomes.

It is for these reasons, that paying more attention to Simon’s concept of ‘perspective’, might balance the scales of divergent views. Divergent views add richly to better understanding of investigation. In fact, some critics of micro-history maintain that micro-history has lost its experimental zest over the last decade or two. Fortunately, Magnússon (2016: 3) expanded on Cohen’s view when he wrote: ‘I shall demonstrate how it is possible to utilize local knowledge in order to give a perspective on the past which would not be possible within the confines of the grand narrative.’

Simon (2009: 16) argues that

‘[i]f we theorize about microhistories as methodologies, we tend to forget about the occasionalism of doing history. But if we theorize about microhistories as occasional attitudes of practitioners who do not have more common than a certain perspective [...] [t]he latter is [...] the way to keep practice open and flexible.’

Such view is only half acceptable. Tension between method, perspective or approach is unnecessary. Historical *praxis* is more complicated than wanting to exclude any of these and probably many more. The *balanced* interplay between method, perspective or approach is probably more correct, not because it *is* or *ought* to be correct, but because that is *how it presents itself* in real life. Writing the micro-history of last night’s supper and planning to do so again tomorrow, will most likely show how historical *praxis* is a dynamic one that reflects and requires many nuances. Practicing writers and researchers will tell you – *regardless* of preconceived research and writing plans – that the historian might have had to deal with such consciousness, upfront. Another observer, having also been invited to the same two suppers, will most probably come up with rather different views about the outcomes of the two evenings. The cook is likely to be rather surprised by all the different responses from the guests.

The development of two popular historical methodologies – micro-history and global history – over the last few decades, gave rise to a ‘number of microhistorians [who] now seek to engage in the histories of places, events and individuals *in a way that also captures the history of global connections* as brought to life by global historians’ (Berg: 2017. Emphasis added) as has already been alluded to above.

This makes the question of size relative because ‘[s]ince its beginnings in the 1970s, microhistory has been dogged by questions about how representative or typical are the cases it investigates’

(Gregory 1999: 108). ‘*Small and large, micro and macro* are comparative terms that have meaning only in relation to one another. A village is micro if analyzed in relation to the state but macro if employed as the setting for a study of households’ (Walton *et al.* 2019: 6). But things are not necessarily that simplistic. Studying the ‘life of seemingly average individuals’ (Franco 2018: 263) by taking the particular as the starting-point and the continue to identify ‘its meaning in the light of its own specific context’ (Franco 2018: 263) is not a foregone conclusion (Berg and Ghobrial 2016: 3). Ankersmit (1989: 137) reminded us that the ‘evident multi-interpretability of a text causes it gradually to lose its capacity to function as arbiter in the historical debate.’ The same holds true for historical methodology. On the one hand therefore, taking a single event (micro) as the focus for investigation, leads on the other hand, to contact with large issues (of macro-scale in nature).

When is history then micro or macro? It depends of the ‘size of the question/s’ asked and answers sought, and *not* necessarily on the size of what is studied (Engelbrecht 2018a: 1–14). Blundell (2015) made this point as follows: ‘The advantages and disadvantages of microhistory are not inherent within the method but rather contingent upon the question that is being answered’. One thing is clear, ‘microhistory does not poise different nations against each other, but rather stresses the common experience of ordinary folk in times past’ (Szijártó 2016a). There is also more good news. At Volda University College (Norway), important research is being done on local history understood as microhistory (Szijártó 2016a).

Large or small connections, involve agency, local spaces and multiple contexts. Seen in this way their particularities and diversities are not separate from ‘large data sets’ (Berg 2017). Even if the focus is on a specific person or event, local space and multiple contexts cannot stand separate from being ‘subject to the “dynamics of the global”’ since they include ‘the flexibility and variability of scale and distance’ (Berg 2017). Earlier, Magnússon (2016: 18) observed that he does not want to reject the principle of larger contexts because they are useful in many ways for the practice of micro-history, and secondly, that global history cannot become the subject of micro-historical investigation. Lastly:

‘microhistory is a methodology rooted in a contemporary culture which is definitely informed by global perspectives [...] I have come to the conclusion that my focus has to be on the micro perspective, but at the same time I need to bring to the micro analysis the assurance that the global vision has had an impact on every individual in his/her own local environment throughout the history of mankind’.

Without those considerations a real sense of being ‘cut off from the mainstream directions of a social science-informed historical writing’ (Berg 2017) could result. Apart from being cut off, Epple (in Amelina *et al.* 2012: 155) wrote that ‘nation-centered history also tends to focus on a limited understanding that excludes in many ways topics such as everyday life, ordinary people and gender

history'. The consequence of this might be that one lands up back at the concerns of Cohen (2012) that relate to 'the larger uses of microhistory'. These larger uses are the following: experience in micro-history prepare participants in the skills required 'in the subtle reading of evidence'; experience in micro-history enable participants to establish the 'entirety of past moments' – and 'antidote to reductionism and blinkered narrative'; the micro-historian 'take to heart the story-teller's art', and lastly, 'microhistory is keen to bring the past to life.' Clearly, some of these local spaces are removed over vast distances from one another making the application of the comparative historical method challenging.

In order to do so, one needs to think about reconsideration of theoretical paradigms because micro-historians ask 'big' questions as well. Seemingly 'big' questions are not the exclusive domain of 'big' or macro-history. For instance, to ask 'big' questions about the historical development of South Africa's capitalism in national and/or global contexts (Hart and Padayachee 2013: 55–85) or, according to Lester (1998: 2), 'imperialism was more than just the naked exercise of material power', still needs to be contextualized. The reason is that micro-history works with generalities but arrive at them differently from other historical genres. It always strives for a comprehensive account (Simon 2015: 1–2) of the research problem.

In retrospect, it has been argued that the current efforts to bring micro- and global history closer together, is a classic result of not having paid enough attention in the beginning to necessary requirements of interdisciplinary research – calls that were made more than a century ago.

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And yet, *if micro-history concentrates on 'small' individual people, events, and experiences, what about the 'small' in the environment?* Humans are, after all, both consumers and co-producers of nature – and more recently – through conservation initiatives, custodians of the environment. Even Cicero (106–43 BC), in his childhood days, had a deep sense of appreciation for the environment. At the end of his life he recalled a 'beautiful spot with poplars and alders lining the river [Liris River near Arpinum] and plenty of opportunities for pleasant walks [...] a quiet retreat for thinking, writing and reading' (Everitt 2003: 23).

These are, to say the least, 'big' concerns, yet, they are made up of 'small people', events and experiences – one by one. And what about 'life forms with which [...] ancestors had lived for millions of years and go to worlds where neither humans or hominids nor apes of any kind had ever existed, worlds dominated by plants, animals, and *microlife*'? (Crosby 2016: 15. Emphasis added). What does it mean that 'colonial environments have been Europeanized' (Crosby 2016: 291) and now needs to be decolonized? Is the environmental 'Other' largely neglected by micro-historians? (Beach 1998; Bonnell 2010). They are complex issues woven into bringing them together in a web of life of the Capitalocene (Moore 2015 and 2016). In addition, medical research, for instance, by H Sul (2015),

‘confirms the complicated function of individual relationships with each and every social setting’. From a micro-historical perspective, they are not unrelated to environmental concerns.

Writing of history has always been accompanied by questions about the general views of how human relationship with the actual present and past is perceived (Szijártó, 2016b: 191). Crosby (2016: 291–292) suggests that:

‘a condition of continual disruption: of plowed fields, razed forests, overgrazed pastures, and burnt prairies, of deserted villages and expanding cities, of humans, animals, plants, and *microlife* that have evolved suddenly coming into intimate contact’ (Emphasis added).

But the varied lived-life experience that micro-historians pride themselves on, is not an uncomplicated affair between and with other life and non-life forms. Of course, there are individual and collective forms of experience that differ from each other. One such is human experience that can hardly take place outside language. For Simon (2015: 183) ‘experience might be regarded as an invisible driving force behind linguistic experiences, and thus behind historical writing.’ But whilst this might be true the ‘transfer of experience into language cannot account for the totality of our relationship to the past’ (Simon: 2015: 190) present and future. In this regard, a small case study will underscore the challenges and exciting opportunities for micro-historians.

The results of a preliminary analysis of the annual rainfall (mm) data for an 18-year period of Nature View Farm that borders on the Kap River Nature Reserve (Eastern Cape, South Africa), suggest that there is much to be unearthed from the relationship between Environmental Micro-history and climate studies. In this study the Line of Best Fit for the 18-year period showed a declining rainfall trend, but that it could be ‘corrected’ in only one rainfall season. From these figures alone, no climate change conclusions could be drawn, but the influence on rainfall during this study period on the lives of the immediate farming communities, suggests how Environmental Humanities have much to contribute to micro-environmental issues in relation to human and non-human existence (Engelbrecht 2018d: 1). Studies in near-future and far-future predictions and analyses of *longue durée* climate change data sets, are not excluded from micro-scope investigation: it varies between micro- and global-levels of analysis. Lastly, the fast-growing body of rain-related research in the world, shows that despite mega-scale models and levels of explanation, ‘local means global, and global means local’ (Engelbrecht 2018d: 30). The one approach is not more important than the other – and in-between, lies micro-historical analysis.

Since humans are part of the only environment we have, it would be surprising to argue that micro-history cannot make a valuable contribution to the better understanding of specific environmental events (happenings). Why is a better understanding necessary? Because humans make environments and environments make humans. Thus, both humans and non-humans are co-producers

in the web of life (Moore 2016: 1–11, 78–115). But since only humans can be accountable around a round table conference on *what we do* and *how we interact* with non-human life. *Environmental Humanities* and *Environmental Micro-history* needs to play an increasingly bigger role at identifying, researching, analyzing and reporting on the *micro* in the *macro* context. Simply put, the so-called macro issues are far too important to leave them to the macro-ists alone. Consequently, the proposition is that *micro-ists* are not less important in contributing to any body of knowledge about past, present and future life and non-life forms.

There is a moral obligation for all -ists to work together. The contribution of the ‘small people’ is no less significant in efforts to e.g. reduce plastics pollution in comparison to that of the most important plastics pollution strategic marketing manager of the largest company in any country of the world at any given time. In fact, there is much agreement that environmental degradation can only successfully be mitigated by a bottom-up process, starting with ordinary people (one person at a time), but also by a top-down approach that involves ‘big business’, ‘big leaders’ and ‘big plans’ with ‘big implementation projects’ – all are fertile study areas for micro-historians. Of course, the micro-history of both ‘big’ and ‘small’ individuals are be written because both contribute to the understanding of the past and future on equal terms.

There is much and urgent empirical and normative work to be done and squabbles about size is counterproductive – instead, they are an eclipse of reason underlying a false consciousness about what is urgent and what is important. Macro ivy-tower academia, collapses however, collective progress when they pursue elitist practices with not social relevance because macro-ists cannot claim any form or exclusive higher standing. After all, they *do not only write about the micro, they also need the micro*. That is why, in a sense, ‘lived experience and collective memory “interpenetrate” each other’ (Crane 1997: 1377) and has practical impact on all life.

These place the questions of ‘size’ in a new perspective. Size, by implication, is not relative to ‘another size’ but relative in terms of its contributions or outcomes to the problem. Human exploitation of nature is currently at unprecedented levels and is happening at a speed and scope beyond the excessive or banal. It equates to ‘endless accumulation’ (Moore 2016: 9) to the extent that a ‘global ecological debt’ (Moore 2016: 11) is increasing to such levels that it cannot be serviced. The result is ‘accumulation by extinction’ (McBrien in Moore 2016: 116–137). Under these conditions, the exceptional is experienced and accepted as the normal (Sodikoff: 2007: 13) because over time the human *mentalité* have become ‘ingrained in traditional knowledge’ (Franco 2018: 264). One such traditional belief is that environmental change is much slower than those of anthropogenic destruction. No longer. Franco (2018: 268) wrote:

‘a deeper understanding of ecological dynamics has altered this view, with environmental changes seen as happening with increased tempo or presenting non-linear behavior, with tipping points leading to quick system imbalances and potentially disastrous outcomes.’

Big issues indeed – but they cannot be resolved without the collective contributing efforts of the micro. It seems simply not possible to think that the macro-, mega-, global-, world-, Universal- or planetary history, alone, can give a balanced overview of the past. We have not, since the start of human writing, produced a satisfactory one-fit-all history of the world. Of course, this includes the classic works by the ‘Greats’.

Tipping points, quick system imbalances and potentially disastrous outcomes, all contain certain elements of size and time inherently imbedded in them. Concepts such as BC or AD; Ancient or Modern; pre-capitalist or post-modern; Early, Middle or Late Middle Ages; Anthropocene or Capitalocene, or post-apartheid (and many more), are no longer the exclusive domains of *longue durée* time scale mega-investigations. Micro-history, and more particularly *Environmental Micro-history* is well situated within the *Environmental Humanities* to make its own unique contribution/s towards understanding of the environment – because in the final analysis, *all* ecologies therein, are *critical* ecologies (Biro 2011). This justifies the call for renewed look into environmental studies in the 21st century, whilst it still lasts.

Within the Environmental Humanities, *Environmental micro-history* has an important role to play in the growing interdisciplinary understanding of the relations between humans and the environment in all aspects of cultural production. Similarly, it faces *new forms of interdisciplinary research* because awareness of escalating ecological crises entered individual humanistic academia at different times: environmental philosophy dates back to the 1970s; environmental history to the 1980s and different forms of ecocriticism from the 1990s. Since the rise of Micro-environmental History and Environmental Humanities now about a decade ago, *Environmental micro-history* finds itself in a *new* ‘big league where big questions and scope’ are at play. It needs to contend with scientific modelling, government policy, social justice movements, and the environment in its broadest sense. The discourse surrounding ecology are often dominated by specialized and instrumental languages of science, public policy and economics of development. Micro-history is well-placed to achieve transformative societal as well as technological innovation. Of course, different historical methods and subjective viewpoints are not unfamiliar to different micro-historical writings (Vaderna 2016) and need not be suppressed. Through the retrospective reconstruction of individual lives as coherent stories are possible through comparative and collaborative opportunities. By sharing primary sources to show how the local history is part of microhistory, new approaches, methodologies and perspectives that can be developed that would assist new micro-history outcomes in the global village.

It goes much further than the traditional focus on the cultural and can now mine the enormous digital archives at our disposal.

The previous sentences contain a few large (macro) concepts: e.g. new approaches, methodologies and perspectives ... outcomes in the global village, etc. But careful consideration should be given to Ankersmit (1989: 137) who cautioned that the

‘essence of postmodernism is precisely that we should avoid pointing out essentialist patterns in the past. There is no reason to assume that our relation to the past and our insight into it will in future be of a metaphorical nature rather than a literal one.’

The establishment and analysis of past and potential future *longue durée* patterns through new approaches and methodologies to gain insight thereof in the global village, are thus not uncontested. It is the *direction of micro-history's modernization process* that needs to stand over for a further attempt.

Conclusion

Needless to remind readers: micro- and macro-stories predate the rise of ancient written tradition. Just as in global history, ‘the constant back and forth between [...] rather diverse approaches of analytical categories is an indication of the instability of the historiographical moment we are trying to assess, at a time when it is still unfolding’ (Douki and Minard 2007: XI). Categories for microhistory also still seem in flux. At worst, the ‘size’ of size has not been quantified, and boundaries and applications of ‘size’ remain the subject of constant debates at conferences.

The rise and proliferation of micro-histories and the development of many unresolved themes indicate that the ‘suspension of the suspension of history’ (Simon 2015b) in our times, is overdue. While Simon believes that micro-history has reached normal-science status at least a decade ago – the view herein is to lean towards the opposite. There can also be no global micro-history, as much as there can be no Universal History of humankind or Universal global history because there is no ‘history, understood as a single, coherent, evolutionary process, when taking into account the experience of all peoples in all times’ (Fukuyama 2006: xii). Micro-historians, however, are critical contributors in playing their part to allow time to put things into perspective.

In fact, *taking the status of current micro-history on review, be it along Kuhn's concept of scientific revolutions, can certainly do no harm*. Biro (2011: 1–20) puts forward three paradoxes that are useful starting points for rethinking current practices. They are: ‘human species has itself become increasing powerful, but at the same time increasingly vulnerable’; as a species ‘humans face enormous divisions that overlay its common humanity’; and lastly, environmentalism as a specific

movement, seems ‘incapable to mobilize more than anaemic and often individualized responses.’ It is no wonder that Jones (2017) argue in favour for a ‘move towards more ecological forms of knowledge production and practice’ to overcome the current slow pace of progress.

We learnt that ‘Tolstoy argued that history is made not by the deeds of great men and women but by the ensemble of collective actions of all those involved in events’ (Walton *et al.* 2019: 3) Tolstoy’s words were:

‘So long as histories were written of separate individuals, whether Caesars, Alexanders, Luthers or Voltaires, and not the histories of *all* – those who take part in an event, it is impossible not to ascribe to individual men a force which can compel other men to direct their activity towards a certain end’ (Tolstoy 1982: 1409).

The canons of scientific thought today (Kuhn 1970: vi) are rather different from those when micro-history first emerged in the early 1970s. And as microhistories, like ‘global history continues to grapple with formulating rigorous theoretical frameworks’ the ‘neatly packed narrative of ever-increasing globalization, interconnectedness and universalization feels unsatisfactory or too abstract’ (Patton 2015).

The single biggest limiting factor in historical perspective in South Africa, is the conformance to traditional theory - the persistent interpretation of everything in South Africa in race terms – race, being a ‘big’ category by all accounts.

Comparative micro-historical method for unravelling the phenomenon of fraud and corruption in South Africa, is highly relevant.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

I sincerely wish to thank R Engelbrecht for having read and commented on earlier drafts of this piece.

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